

## **Southern Forest Resource Assessment – A Lesson in Releasing Controversial Research Findings**

Carol A. Whitlock

**Period of Time:** 3 years

**Problem:** Assessment partners with unique interpretations to laws about public access to information; external pressure from different interest groups.

**PR Instruments Used:** Technical support; summary report; CD, Web based version; dedicated issue of the Journal Forestry; online availability of customized maps; expert workshops; public meetings; internal communication; media communication.

**Causes of Success:** Definition of the identity of the Assessment; participative communication; clear communication strategy; combination of communication instruments; providing confidence in the products (peer review); high priority of Public Relations. ◀

One key public relations role is to protect the ability of the organization to pursue its mission, which for a research organization is often to ensure adoption of scientific information. Following is the story of how public relations principles were successfully incorporated into the formulation, execution, and release of the Southern Forest Resource Assessment, a large-scale multi-agency effort to evaluate the current and future status of forests in the Southern United States.

### **Background**

In the 1990s, the South became the primary source of timber in the United States as harvesting shifted away from the public forests in the Pacific Northwest region and technological enhancements began to favor southern timber production. The

result was concern about the South's ability to satisfy both the needs of a growing international timber market and the changing values of its own urbanizing citizenry. The "lightening rod" issue that crystallized this concern was a controversy over satellite chip mills, which had recently sprung up to meet the demands of a growing paper products industry.

The Southern Forest Resource Assessment was commissioned by the Chief of the USDA Forest Service for a region where forests are held, not predominately in public or forest-industry ownership, but by an array of landowners ranging from farmers to retirees to investment companies. More than half of the South's forest land is in individually owned parcels of 10 acres or less. With such diverse ownerships and objectives, questions like "*Are chip mills degrading forest health and the environment?*" and "*Is the South drawing too heavily on its timber supplies?*" and "*How are human uses of forests affecting wildlife and water?*" could not be answered without a comprehensive understanding of the history, status, and likely future condition of southern forests.

The Assessment was a three-year project sponsored by four Federal agencies under the guidance of the Southeastern Natural Resources Leadership Group and the natural resource departments of the 13 Southern States (Virginia to Texas). The Assessment leaders were Forest Service employees – David Wear, a research economist with the Southern Research Station, and John Greis, a water quality specialist with the Southern Region of the National Forest System. Their team of 25 scientists and analysts from government agencies and universities drafted chapters on social and economic issues, changes in forest cover, forest health, plant and animal communities, environmental quality, and resources at risk.

The team produced a 600-page technical report (Wear and Greis 2002a) consisting of 25 chapters and a 100-page summary report (Wear and Greis 2002b), all subjected to blind review (reviewers' identities unknown to the author) by more than a hundred experts from universities, government, industry, and environmental organizations. Additional products from the Assessment included hardcopy, CD, and Web-based versions of the reports; a dedicated issue of the *Journal of Forestry*; and online availability of customized maps.

## The Risks

Large-scale assessments, especially those of western forest resources, typically become the focus of competing interest groups, creating pressures that have the potential to delay and sometimes permanently block completion. These pressures migrated to the Southern United States with the shift of harvesting from the Pacific Northwest region of the country. Although the intent of the Assessment was to create a shared understanding of southern natural resource issues and opportunities, any missteps along the way could easily have led to an inadvertent slide into the polarization that had characterized similar efforts in the Western United States.

### 1 Internal Partnerships

The Assessment was a partnership of Federal and State agencies, whose often differing missions made the collaboration challenging. All the partners had unique interpretations to laws about public access to information and divergent processes for approving documents and responding to media inquiries.

Two of the Federal agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are primarily responsible for formulating and enforcing regulations; while the Forest Service concentrates on land management and the Tennessee Valley Authority land-management mission is secondary to its responsibility for generating electrical power.

In the 13 States, regulatory and management responsibilities combine and overlap in a myriad of unique ways. State agencies had developed an array of best forest management practices (BMPs) to protect water quality. The Assessment focused public attention on those practices, leaving agency officials vulnerable to criticism that their BMPs might be less rigorous and less effective than those of neighboring States.

Frequent and thorough communication was needed to build this fragile network into a solid partnership capable of withstanding internal turf issues and external challenges to the credibility of the Assessment.

◀ *Definition  
of Identity*

## 2 External Politics

On the national level, the three-year life of the Assessment spanned a change from a Democrat to a Republican Administration, each with its own priorities and its own position on regulation, economics, and the environment. Suffice it to say that the release of the Assessment could have been delayed indefinitely if the Assessment was perceived as a "Trojan horse" for the views and policies of the former Administration.

According to media reports and communications with the Assessment leaders, grassroots NGOs considered timber harvesting to be the greatest threat to forest sustainability and portable chip mills to be the greatest threat to forest health. There was no evidence to suggest that the NGOs would be likely to embrace any other outcome. At the other end of the spectrum, forest industry was fearful that the Assessment would support NGO conclusions, thereby leading to further constraints on their management options.

The media took a somewhat schizophrenic view of the Assessment. Reporters craved one source of credible information, fully aware that they lacked technical expertise in natural resource issues and that decision-making needed to be based on sound science. At the same time, although they did not know what to believe about the chip mill debate, they did understand the value of controversy in selling newspapers and advertising space.

## Meeting the Challenge

Over the course of the Assessment, the leaders drew on technical expertise from the partner agencies and worked closely with public relations specialists from their own two Forest Service organizations. They had two goals before them. The first was to develop a process that ensured public input and buy-in. The second was to coordinate the work of the 25 authors – researchers, managers, and regulators – and more than a hundred reviewers from universities, industry, and NGOs. Their challenge was to do both while guarding against any premature release of unverified data and avoiding "politicization" of the peer review process – the way that scientists criticize and improve each other's work.

## 1 Involving the Public

Before one author or reviewer was selected or one word of the Assessment was written, the Assessment leaders decided to use questions to organize the collecting, analyzing, and reporting of data. They first convened an experts' workshop to define a set of concerns and derivative questions. The information from the workshop was then released for public review and refinement at open meetings in five strategically selected locations. At each public meeting, attendees had the opportunity to participate in question identification in a small-group setting. The Assessment leaders combed through notes from the public meetings, developed a set of questions in a session that was open to the public, and subjected the refined questions to another round of public comment. The questions that emerged then became the "heart of the SFRA" and the contract between the Assessment team and the public (Wear 2002).

Interactive  
Communication

## 2 Capitalizing on Technology

The Internet played a critical role throughout the course of the Assessment. During the three-year period, visitors to the Southern Research Station host site doubled from 20,000 to 40,000 "hits" a day. Most significantly, the Assessment Web page offered:

- Biographies of all team members,
- timelines and progress reports for all Assessment chapters and documents,
- hypertext links within the technical report that allowed readers to follow their interests,
- drafts of chapters for public review and the option of submitting online comments while reviewing chapters,
- all the data sets used by the authors in preparing their drafts,
- posting of all public comments, *and*
- simultaneous media access to the draft and final reports (technical and summary).

On the day of the release, video downlinks of the news conference enabled reporters from small newspapers and broadcasters to attend without incurring travel expenses and time away from their workplaces.

### **3 Protecting Scientific Credibility**

Publications printed by Federal agencies are rarely subjected to the blind peer reviews that would take place if the publisher were a refereed science journal. However, the advantage of government versus journal publication comes into play for long documents that require distribution to a broader audience than the scientific community. To ensure that the Assessment enjoyed the same level of credibility as a journal paper, the team decided that each of the 25 chapters would undergo a blind peer review by recognized subject matter experts from appropriate universities, corporations, and NGOs; and further, that the Assessment leaders would serve as referees for ensuring that important identified issues were adequately addressed by the chapter authors. With the identities of the reviewers only known to the Assessment leaders, the reviewers had the freedom to criticize the work of the authors without fear that their comments would be used beyond the context of the scientific process.

### **4 Internal Communications**

By far, the most time invested in communications was with the partners and with their organizational layers, both in the field and in Washington and State capitols. Early meetings with the authors, editors, and publishers helped to create a consistent "look and feel" among the chapters. The Assessment leaders convened a special session in which the partners developed a consistent strategy for handling requests that might be submitted under the Freedom of Information Act.

The team understood that it would be folly to proceed with the release before all were comfortable with the Assessment's conclusions, and they were committed to taking as much time as needed to achieve that goal. Regional leaders of the partner agencies became well versed in the Assessment findings and their public relations specialists were "in the loop". Every Forest Service research and national-forest leader in the South had an opportunity to review the draft and to convene for a day-long meeting to discuss its implications. A contingency of resource

experts pulled from the 13 State agencies spent several days studying the draft document and offering questions and comments. And as the release date approached, Washington briefings by the Assessment leaders took place at least once and sometimes twice a week.

### **5 Strategies for Communicating Externally**

Needless to say, communicating the gist of a 600-page report to a public that normally gets its information in 30-second sound bites was a challenge. Although the public would have access to the myriad of details in the report, it was important for the Assessment leaders to use their “15 minutes of fame” to synthesize those details into a coherent and accurate summary that was relevant to public concerns. To start the process of developing that summary, the partners gathered to brainstorm the toughest questions that reporters might ask. The Assessment leaders incorporated the questions into a set of key findings and messages, which they refined and rehearsed in two day-long sessions of intensive on-camera media training. By the day of the release, they could have recited their messages in their sleep.

During the last month before the release date, the team came under pressure from the media and other interested parties, both to answer the overall question of sustainability and to share specific findings. Although these requests seemed innocuous, the team had adopted a policy of no early leaks early on, because they realized the danger of providing piecemeal answers without the framework of a coherent and accurate summary. All review drafts were distributed only in hard copy, versus electronically, to reduce the likelihood of forwarding. By limiting chapter reviewers to one or two individuals, any leaks by a single reviewer would only reveal 1/25 of the Assessment content.

The Assessment leaders scheduled briefings for industry and NGO representatives on the morning before the public release, thereby providing enough advance notice of the key findings to prepare news releases and talking points for interviews.

And finally, the team designated a rapid response force to review media coverage and call reporters when appropriate to correct reporting inaccuracies and refute misstatements.

*Communi-  
cation  
Strategy*

## Measures of Success

The release of the Assessment was not without difficulty, but by-and-large the difficulties had been anticipated and plans were in place to address them. The upshot was that the team produced a draft for public comment and a final report within their projected time frames.

Under pressure from the media, some information leaks did occur but were minimized when the reporter was unable to confirm his sources and therefore could not get a jump on the story.

The team engendered enough confidence in the Assessment's credibility that the media built their stories on its findings rather than the validity of its findings. When one of the NGOs attempted to promote an 11<sup>th</sup> hour report, offering no data but presenting a competing assessment of southern forest sustainability, its leaders found a deaf ear in the media.

On the prompting of some from the NGO community, the Atlanta newspaper sent the Forest Service a query under the Freedom of Information Act. The query included a request for the identities and specific comments of the anonymous peer reviewers. After claiming an exemption to withhold passages that contained specific information about the peer reviewers to protect the deliberative nature of the scientific process, the Agency held its breath in anticipation of the appeal that nearly always follows such responses. None came.

Finally and most importantly, the South is using the Assessment findings to set priorities for research and public land acquisition, to attract and mobilize resources for high priority projects, to improve water quality through more effective Best Management Practices, and to formulate landowner and community assistance programs. The Assessment regularly appears in media reports, with combatants sometimes pulling out specific passages in support of their own positions. And the Forest Service Chief has been quoted as saying that the Assessment was largely responsible for crystallizing his thinking about the issues that threaten U.S. forests today.

The success of the Assessment was the result of linking sound science to high-level communications and public involvement. Virtually all of the credit goes to David Wear and John Greis, whose foresight was matched by their determination to see the project through to completion and their patience with those who needed to be brought along.

### **References**

Wear, David N.; Greis, John G. 2002a. Southern Forest Resource Assessment. Gen. Tech. Rep. SRS-53. Asheville, NC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station. 635 p.

Wear, David N.; Greis, John G., eds. 2002b. Southern Forest Resource Assessment: Summary Report. Gen. Tech. Rep. SRS-54. Asheville, NC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station. 102 p.

